



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as The Alexandria Times and Advertiser

Out of the Attic

The Sun Fire Company

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Image: Speaking trumpet, on display at the Friendship Firehouse Museum, Office of Historic Alexandria.

While the Friendship Fire Company was Alexandria's first firefighting company and stays in our memory through the Friendship Firehouse Museum on South Alfred Street, there were other fire companies in early Alexandria. The Sun Fire Company is the second fire company that we have written records for. While there is some disagreement as to the exact date of the company's formation, we know that there are minutes of its March 1775 meeting. It's safe to say that the company was founded in 1774 or early 1775.

The March 1775 meeting minutes tell us a lot about the company. First, they limited the membership to 45 persons.

Absent members were to be fined one shilling three pence. Members were to receive two buckets, a linen bag containing at least four yards of material and a wicker basket as close to their admittance as possible.

The Revolutionary War required the services of many of the Sun Fire Company's members during the late 1770s and early 1780s, including Captains Valentine Peirs and John Allison and Colonel John Fitzgerald. The Sun Company participated in Alexandria's first fire alarm system by having its members light candles in their front windows the moment they heard of a fire.

In 1793, the Sun Fire Company, unsatisfied with its single English engine that had been delivered in 1785, bought three from a Mr. Mason of Philadelphia. The three engines were able to hold 190, 170 and 160 gallons of water, which they dispersed in 90 seconds when they were operated by a full complement of 18 to 24 men.

The redundancy of having three fire companies in town was causing confusion at fires. In 1796, there was a summit between the three companies, where they agreed to have three commanders, one from each company, who would act one at a time to control engines, fire hooks and ladders. Each commander asserted his authority by yelling through a speaking trumpet, much like the one seen in the image to the left, which is on display at the Friendship Firehouse Museum.

Fire Prevention Week is Oct. 6 to 12 in the United States, the timing of which commemorates the Great Fire of Chicago of 1871. Fire Prevention Week is meant to draw attention to the prevention of future





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

fires. It also provides an opportunity to marvel at the evolution of firefighting techniques and technology throughout Alexandria's past, and to honor firefighters – past and present.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.